

## (14) TRAINEE HANDOUTS

### TRAINING FOR VSO LESSON FOURTEEN POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD)

<b>PREREQUISITE TRAINING</b>	Prior to this training you should have completed all prior VSO lessons.
<b>PURPOSE OF LESSON</b>	<p>The purpose of this lesson is to teach you the elements that must be present in a claim for service connection for PTSD, and the ways that you can best assist your clients in developing and presenting these claims to VBA.</p> <p>This lesson will present the following material to you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ The three elements of a successful PTSD claim;</li><li>▪ The three types of PTSD claims;</li><li>▪ How a stressor is confirmed.</li></ul>
<b>TIME REQUIRED</b>	2.0 hours
<b>INSTRUCTIONAL METHOD</b>	Participatory discussion and practical exercise
<b>MATERIALS/ TRAINING AIDS</b>	<p>Classroom or private area where a discussion may be held. Chairs and writing surfaces are required.</p> <p>Large writing surface such as—easel pad, chalkboard, dry erase board, overhead projector, etc., with appropriate markers, or computer with projection equipment and PowerPoint software.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ <i>PTSD</i> PowerPoint presentation</li><li>▪ <i>PTSD</i> Student Handouts<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ 38 CFR 3.304(f)</li><li>○ 38 CFR 4.125(a)</li><li>○ M21-1, Part III, Chap. 5.14</li><li>○ M21-1, Part VI, Chap. 11.37</li></ul></li></ul>
<b>REFERENCES</b>	

### What Is PTSD?

What is now known as PTSD has been called several other things in the past. The problem of "traumatic stress" was first known in World War I as shell shock; or traumatic neurosis. In

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World War II and the Korean Conflict, traumatic stress was re-identified as combat fatigue. Following the Vietnam Era, we have re-identified traumatic stress as PTSD. Refer to Pages 11-21 of this handout for a good overview of what PTSD is, its symptoms, diagnostic criteria, and evidence gathering.

The etiology (the study of causes, specifically the cause of a disease) of the disorder is exposure to an overwhelming environmental stress. Since not every individual responds to such stress with a post-traumatic stress syndrome, a variety of factors in clinical combination are required to produce the pathologic state. These include (1) the suddenness and unexpectedness of the stress, as in major fires, explosions, and airplane crashes, personal or sexual assaults, or in natural disasters like floods, earthquakes, and tornadoes; (2) the bloody brutality and horror of events associated with active armed combat or terrorist attacks; (3) the more prolonged and chronic stress of exposure to inhumane treatment such as occurs in POW and concentration camps, with the frequently associated torture and atrocities; (4) the psychological and constitutional strengths and weaknesses of the victim; (5) concurrent bodily injury (especially of the head) suffered by the victim; and (6) the nature and availability of social supports. PTSD can occur hours, months, or even years after the stressor and must persist for at least one month.

The condition is characterized by recurrent episodes of re-experiencing the traumatic event. Commonly, the person has recurrent and intrusive recollections of the traumatic event or recurrent distressing dreams during which the event is re-experienced. Along with re-experiencing the event, the person may persistently avoid stimuli associated with the trauma, or a numbing of general responsiveness that was not present before the trauma.

A person suffering from PTSD may also experience persistent symptoms of increased arousal that were not present before the trauma. These symptoms may include difficulty falling or staying asleep, hyper-vigilance, exaggerated startle response, difficulty in concentrating or in completing tasks, and changes in aggression.

The classic symptoms characteristic of PTSD are often intensified or precipitated when the person is exposed to situations or activities that resemble or symbolize the original trauma (i.e., cold snowy weather or uniformed guards for survivors of death camps in cold climates; hot, humid weather for veterans of the South Pacific or Vietnam).

### **The Three Elements of a Successful PTSD Claim**

There are three separate and distinct elements of a claim for S/C for PTSD that are set forth and defined by law and regulation. ALL THREE must be present in order for a claim for S/C to be successful. The absence of any one (or more) of these elements inevitably lengthens the time needed to process the claim, and generally doom the claim to failure. PTSD, like most of the other disabilities subject to the presumptive provisions of the law, often is not diagnosed in service, so it will not be shown specifically in the SMR's (unless it WAS diagnosed in service). The three elements that must exist for any claim for S/C to be successful. That is, a) an in-service event; b) a current diagnosis of the disability; and c) a nexus (or link) between the in-service event and the diagnosis. The same is true for PTSD claims.

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### *In-Service Event (Stressor)*

The first element of a successful PTSD claim is the existence of an in-service event (stressor) that precipitated the PTSD. This event, or stressor, must be documented by official records in most cases, or at least be supported by a preponderance of the evidence. In PTSD claims, even more so than in other claims for presumptive disabilities, the “who, what, why, when, and where” surrounding the stressor is vital to the success or failure of the claim. The best thing that the SO can provide in these claims is assistance to the veteran in providing as full and complete a description of the in-service event; particularly in cases where the stressor is not conceded (such as in combat situations). The veteran’s statement should include, in addition to a full and complete description of the event, full names of all persons involved, date(s) {at least month and year}, unit(s) of assignment {to at least the company or battalion level}, and places {at least city or province, and state or country}. VA has a specific form for use in this instance – VA Form 21-0781 (“Statement in Support of Claim for PTSD”) and VA Form 21-0781a (for use in claims for PTSD relating to personal assault or sexual harassment). While their use is not mandatory, the forms are designed to elicit the necessary information from the claimant in a logical format; thus, you should strongly advocate their use.

The most common stressor would involve either a serious threat to one's life or physical integrity; a serious threat or harm to one's children, spouse, or other close relatives and friends; sudden destruction of one's home or community; or seeing another person who has recently been, or is being, seriously injured or killed as the result of an accident or physical violence. In some cases the stressor may be learning about a serious threat or harm to a close friend or relative, i.e., that one's child has been kidnapped, tortured or killed.

The trauma may be experienced alone (rape or assault) or in the company of groups of people (military combat). Stressors producing PTSD include natural disasters (floods, earthquakes), accidental disasters (car accidents with serious physical injury, airplane crashes, large fires, collapse of physical structures), or deliberately caused disasters (bombing, torture, death camps). Some stressors frequently produce PTSD (torture, being a POW) and others produce it only occasionally (natural disasters or car accidents). Sometimes there is a concomitant physical component of the trauma, which may even involve direct damage to the central nervous system (malnutrition, head injury). PTSD is apparently more severe and longer lasting when the stressor is of human design.

Sexually related traumatic events may be considered stressors. Conclusions that rape, sexual assault, or other personal assaults are stressors are easier to make since, obviously, these events are considered stressful to almost anyone. On the other hand, sexual harassment as a stressor may be less obvious and more difficult to corroborate. However, sexual harassment should not be ruled out as a stressor. For example, repeated incidences of sexual harassment collectively may be considered a stressor.

Sometimes the duty assignment itself can be considered a stressor. Examples of this could be assignment to a burn ward in a hospital, assignment to graves registration details, or assignments relating to the transportation of the dead or wounded.

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You may encounter claims where PTSD was actually diagnosed in service and shown in SMR's. In this circumstance, there still must be a verified stressor shown by official records and a nexus between the two drawn by the examiner before S/C could be established. The in-service diagnosis itself is NOT sufficient to establish S/C.

The most important element they should take from this lesson is that the in-service event, or stressor, *is a particular event or situation* that resulted in the symptoms of the disability. Generalities such as "I was in Vietnam" or "I was sent to Iraq" are of little value in the establishment of a stressor, because they do not describe a particular event or situation. This topic, and how the stressor is verified, will be presented in much greater detail in a subsequent topic in this lesson.

### Current Diagnosis

The second element of a successful PTSD claim is a current diagnosis. If the veteran has a stressor, but is not diagnosed with PTSD, the claim cannot be successful for that reason. Thus, you should be sure that medical evidence showing the diagnosis accompanies the claim, or at least the veteran provides completed and signed VA Forms 21-4142 for private physicians or medical facilities, or the full names of VA medical facilities where treatment was provided. It is important to understand that, while VA cannot establish S/C for PTSD on the basis of private medical evidence alone, it is important that ALL available medical evidence be of record to enable a fair and impartial decision be reached. A VA examination will seldom be ordered in PTSD claims until the stressor is confirmed or verified (more about how this is done will follow in a subsequent topic in this lesson). The claims folder will be reviewed by the examiner prior to the examination, so it is important that the file contain all available medical evidence in support of the claim. If the examiner does not diagnose PTSD, then the claim is almost certain to be denied on that basis.

### Nexus

This element of the PTSD claim is vital in order for the claim to be successful. The law requires that the examiner, and **NOT** the RVSR, must relate the diagnosed PTSD to the in-service event, or stressor. The RVSR has no latitude in this determination; only the examiner has this authority. This relationship establishes the nexus, or link, between the in-service event to the diagnosis, thus providing the third element necessary for a successful claim. For example, a veteran claims PTSD as a result of a gunshot wound he suffered in combat. SMR's confirm the GSW, PTSD is diagnosed, and the examiner finds that the PTSD resulted from the GSW. All three elements are present, and the claim would be granted on that basis. However, if in the same scenario, the examiner found that the PTSD was unrelated to the GSW, but rather was related to a post-service motor vehicle accident, the nexus, or link, to the in-service event (the GSW) would NOT be established, and the claim would be denied on that basis. In the second scenario above, you have a combat veteran with a GSW who is diagnosed with PTSD, yet the claim is denied properly because the nexus was not established. Changing the scenario again,

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instead of PTSD being diagnosed by the examiner in scenario #1, say that the examiner diagnosed a personality disorder instead. Again, you would have a combat veteran with a GSW, yet the claim for PTSD would be properly denied because the disability was not diagnosed, and personality disorders are not disabilities for which S/C can be established.

### **The Three Types of PTSD Claims**

There are three principal types of PTSD claims. They are PTSD based on combat incidents, events, or trauma; PTSD based on non-combat incidents, events, or trauma; and PTSD based on personal or sexual assault or sexual harassment.

#### **Combat-related PTSD**

This is the most common type of PTSD claim handled by VBA. It can be one of the easiest claims to process, but it can also be one of the most time-consuming, depending upon the facts in the individual case.

VA procedural manuals state that, if the evidence establishes that the veteran was engaged in combat with the enemy, the veteran's statements (referred to as lay testimony) alone may establish the occurrence of the in-service event, or stressor. "Combat" is not defined in the regulations, but in other guidance; exposure to combat is conceded if it is shown that the veteran was engaged in direct action against the enemy. Thus, an infantryman who was in a firefight with enemy forces was in combat, but a bomber pilot was not unless it is shown that his plane was attacked by ground fire or enemy aircraft. Remember, it is a requirement that the involvement in combat be affirmatively verified by official records, and that the incident or incidents provided in the testimony not be refuted by other clear and convincing evidence to the contrary. The RVSR is permitted some latitude in this finding. Here are some scenarios as examples:

1. Veteran, whose MOS (Military Occupational Specialty) is that of a rifleman, claims PTSD as the result of being involved in a firefight in Vietnam. His DD-214 shows the award of a Combat Infantryman Badge, and his personnel records confirm that he was attached to an infantry company during the period of time the alleged firefight occurred, even though the records did not mention any actual combat or the firefight related by the veteran. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, the RVSR would concede his involvement in combat with the enemy; thus permitting the veteran's statement to establish the in-service event, or stressor.
2. Veteran, whose MOS is that of a clerk, claims PTSD as the result of being shelled during a night attack while in Vietnam. His DD-214 does not indicate any combat decorations. His personnel records confirm his occupation as a clerk, assigned to a headquarters company of a support unit. The records have no mention of any such incident as related

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by the veteran. The RVSR could not concede involvement in combat, since the official records are insufficient; thus the in-service incident or stressor is unconfirmed. (A subsequent topic of this lesson will explain how stressors are confirmed.)

3. Veteran, whose MOS is that of a helicopter crewman, claims PTSD as the result of being a door gunner on helicopter gunships involved in flight operations in Vietnam. His DD-214 does not indicate any combat decorations. His personnel records confirm his completion of several service schools relating to helicopter maintenance and weaponry, and his service records confirm his assignment to rotary-wing aviation units involved in operations against the enemy during the time frame claimed by the veteran. The preponderance of evidence in this scenario would permit the RVSR to concede involvement in combat with the enemy, even though no combat decorations are of record. Thus, the veteran's statements would confirm the in-service event, or stressor in this case.

The point you must grasp relating to combat-related PTSD is that, if VA can confirm the veteran's involvement in combat against the enemy, the veteran's statements alone, so long as they are not contradicted by clear and convincing evidence to the contrary, can establish the stressor without the need for confirmation (the subject of a following topic). Combat-related PTSD claims where VA establishes or concedes combat-involvement are comparatively simple to process from that point. All that is needed to complete the claim is a VA examination to provide the diagnosis and the examiner to provide the nexus. However, if the involvement in combat cannot be established or conceded, then the stressor must be confirmed (subject of following topic), a task that can, in many instances be daunting and/or time-consuming. Thus, the most important contribution that you can provide in claims of this nature is assisting the veteran in preparing a full and complete, fact-filled statement that relates the incident(s) that the veteran feels resulted in his/her PTSD. The VA Forms 21-0781 and 21-0781a are best used for this purpose. If the veteran has received individual awards of gallantry, and they appear on the DD-214, or the veteran has copies of his award citation, submit those with the claim. You should also recognize that there are literally thousands of websites on the internet that deal with areas often related to PTSD claims, such as Vietnam, "The Wall", as well as the current military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Very often, veterans and their representatives attempt to use downloads from these websites to verify their stressors. Remember that, just because something is on the internet does not automatically make it true. The only websites that VA recognizes as reliable sources of information end in .mil or .gov., signifying that the websites are either sponsored by the military or the federal government. Remember also that a VA examination will seldom be ordered until the stressor is confirmed.

### **Non-Combat Related PTSD**

The second-most common type of PTSD claim that VA receives is non-combat related. Unlike the combat-related claims discussed previously, VA cannot routinely establish or concede the in-service event (stressor) based on the veteran's statements alone. The majority of these types of claims take longer to complete, as VA must first confirm the stressor (subject of following topic).

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Non-combat PTSD claims require the same three elements – the in-service event (stressor), the diagnosis of PTSD, and the nexus or link (made by the examiner, and NOT the RVSR) between the stressor and the diagnosis. The stressor can be from many different factors, either related to military duty or totally unrelated. Examples of duty-related stressors would be ship sinkings or collisions at sea, aircraft crashes, training accidents, assignment to graves registration details or to a burn ward, etc. Non-duty related stressors could be natural disasters such as floods or fires, motor vehicle accidents, or incidents of terrorism. In either instance, the veteran's presence or involvement and relationship to the stressor must be shown by official records before the claim can proceed. As in the prior topic, the most important contribution that you can provide is assisting the veteran in preparing a full and complete, fact-filled statement that relates the incident(s) that the veteran feels resulted in his/her PTSD. The "who, what, why, when, and where" is of primary importance, as those details are required in order for the stressor to be confirmed by official sources. The VA Form 21-0781 should be used for this purpose. Remember that, for this type of PTSD claim, VA has to confirm the event, then the veteran's presence AT the event, in order to establish the stressor.

In some instances, service records alone can provide sufficient evidence to establish the stressor or even to allow the RVSR to concede the stressor. Here are 3 scenarios as examples:

1. A veteran claims PTSD based on an aircraft crash he witnessed while stationed on board an aircraft carrier. His MOS is that of an aircraft weapons technician, service records place him on board the ship at the time of the crash and confirm its occurrence, and show that the veteran received a meritorious award for his actions following the crash. The evidence described in this scenario would be sufficient in and of itself to confirm the stressor to allow the claim to proceed.
2. A veteran claims PTSD based on a motor vehicle accident. Service medical records confirm the veteran's involvement in an automobile accident in service, in which he suffered significant injuries. Service records show the accident to have occurred while on authorized leave and did not arise under circumstances suggestive of willful misconduct. The evidence described in this scenario would be sufficient in and of itself to confirm the stressor to allow the claim to proceed.
3. A veteran claims PTSD based on the 9/11/01 terrorist attacks in NYC. His MOS is shown to be that of a recruiter. Service records show that he was assigned to a recruiting station in Manhattan and that he was present for duty on 9/11/01. The evidence described in this scenario would be sufficient in and of itself to confirm the stressor to allow the claim to proceed.

The examples above are the exception, rather than the rule, in non-combat PTSD claims. It is unusual for the stressors on those claims to be so easily verified. The examples were provided as an illustration that it CAN occur without additional development. Unfortunately, in most of these types of claims, considerable development is required to verify the stressor. In most cases, it is necessary to first establish the occurrence of the claimed event, then VA has to place the veteran at the event by official records. This is why the veteran's initial statement describing the in-service event or stressor must be a full and complete, with all the "who, what, why, when, where" included. Again, the VA Forms 21-0781 and 21-0781a are best used for this purpose. General statements without specifics serve only to delay the claim, as VA has to go back to the veteran time and again to solicit the necessary specifics. Again, you should work closely with your clients in claims of this type to provide the necessary information up front. Remember that a VA examination will seldom be ordered until the stressor is confirmed.

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### **PTSD Based on Personal or Sexual Assault or Sexual Harassment**

Claims of this type include rape or attempted rape (female or male), sexual or non-sexual assault, sexual harassment, or other such similar instances where the veteran, using the “reasonable person standard”, could be considered to have been in fear of death, bodily harm, or severe mental anguish or distress, and, as a result, suffer from PTSD. These are usually the most time-consuming and difficult PTSD claims that VA has to deal with. The principal reason for the complexity of these claims is the fact that, in most instances, documentation of the claimed assault or harassment does not exist. Thus, it is difficult for VA to document the event through official records in order to confirm the in-service event or stressor. VA, recognizing this difficulty, allows the use of alternative evidence, known as “markers”, to be used as evidence which, in many instances, can be of significant probative value in building a case that the in-service event or stressor, did occur. Refer to Page 50 of this handout for a list of acceptable “markers”.

There are instances where claims of this nature can be relatively easy for VA to complete. One example would be the case of a female veteran who claims to have been raped in service, resulting in PTSD. In her claim, she provides the full name and service number of the perpetrator. VA obtains his records, which indicate that he was charged with and convicted of the rape of the victim, who was identified in the records. Instances such as these DO occur, but they are rare.

It should be stressed again that the best service you can provide to your client in claims of this type is assisting them in preparing a full and complete “who, what, why, when, and where” statement that describes the in-service event or stressor, the circumstances leading up to and following it, with as much detail as can be elicited. The VA Form 21-0781a is best used for this purpose. Again, incomplete responses, generalizations, or vague complaints are never of any value, and only serve to prolong the process.

VA recognizes that official records often do not provide documentation of the in-service event or stressor in circumstances of personal or sexual assault or sexual harassment. Thus, VA accepts other, more “non-official” sources of evidence that may be of probative value. Refer to the second section of Page 50 of this handout for an example listing of these types of sources.

VA strives to be overly sensitive to claims of this nature for what should be obvious reasons. The stock development letters that are used to solicit descriptions of the stressful incidents are carefully worded accordingly. You are reminded of the sensitive nature of these claims as well. You should be careful NOT to apply your own personal values or value judgments to either the claim or the claimant.

Both males and females may have experienced sexual or physical trauma in service. These claims are NOT limited only to females. Although some victims seek counseling and/or treatment for the after-effects of the trauma, many never discuss the incident or their medical/psychological condition with anyone. Generally, victims are uncomfortable discussing the incident or event, but relate that “they have not felt the same” since the incident or event.



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Since secondary evidence of behavioral changes may be the ONLY evidence of record to support that the alleged assault actually occurred, the value of these “markers” in the claim cannot be over-stressed. Sometimes VA has to request a clinical interpretation from a neuropsychiatric physician in order to establish a relationship (nexus) between the changes noted and a diagnosis.

While there must be credible evidence to support the allegation that the stressful incident (assault, harassment, etc.) occurred, this does NOT mean that the evidence must actually PROVE that it occurred. However, the evidence must be probative to the extent that it establishes at least an approximate balance of positive and negative evidence that it occurred. Thus, you should insure that any and all evidence that the claimant can provide is submitted. VA will, of course, obtain the SMR’s and service records, but as discussed, those records are seldom conclusive in these cases.

The decision as to the sufficiency of evidence is solely that of the RVSR, and the confirmation of the stressor falls within the RVSR’s judgment as well. This is not to say that an unfavorable decision can be made while there are evidence requests outstanding, or that additional evidence cannot be requested. It is meant to explain that, once the RVSR has reviewed all the requested evidence, including the “markers” and secondary types of evidence previously discussed, the rater determines that the evidence is sufficient to base a decision on. Then the rater “weighs” the evidence, resolving all reasonable doubt in the veteran’s favor, and either decides that the incident DID occur and the stressor is confirmed and orders a VA examination; or finds that the incident/stressor is NOT confirmed, and denies the claim on that basis.

### **How A Stressor Is Confirmed**

“Confirming a stressor” merely means that the stressful incident related by the veteran is confirmed by official records in one way or another. In the case of combat-related stressors, as previously related, if official records show that the veteran was actually engaged in combat with the enemy, his statements alone will confirm the stressor. One of the easiest ways that VA can confirm a combat-related stressor is if the veteran has been awarded a combat decoration or a decoration of valor. The law permits the presence of specified decorations to confirm the stressor without further development or documentation.

#### **Combat Decorations or Decorations of Valor**

Refer to Pages 22-39 of this handout for a complete list and explanation of each award. Remember that certain decorations, such as the Bronze Star and others can be awarded for merit as well as valor. In cases such as that, the “valor” award is designated by the inclusion of a “Combat V”. Meritorious awards DO NOT confirm a stressor. It is emphasized that combat *wounds* are clear evidence of a stressor not needing confirmation, and should be accompanied by

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the award of the Purple Heart Medal. In instances where combat wounds are claimed, but there is no evidence of the Purple Heart Medal being awarded, then the circumstances must be developed before the stressor can be accepted. Occasionally VA will solicit a VA Form 21-0781 or a description of the stressor from the veteran when it is clear that the veteran was awarded one (or more) decorations of combat or valor. By staying involved in the veteran's claim, you can spot these errors in claims processing and bring them to the attention of Adjudication personnel so as to not unnecessarily delay the processing of the claim.

### **Specific Duty Assignments or POW's**

Remember, as discussed in previous topics, if the veteran was a POW, or his duty assignments were, in and of themselves stressful, such as graves registration, assignment to a burn ward, etc., those assignments or situations confirm the stressor without the need for further development or documentation.

### **Unconfirmed Stressors – Now What?**

If the veteran alleges the in-service incident or stressor was related to combat but there is no documentation of record (either decorations or official records confirming combat with the enemy), then VA must confirm the incident through official sources. At this point, the claims process slows to a crawl. After gathering all of the available evidence based on the veteran's claim and description of the incident(s), that evidence is sent to the Center for Unit Records Research, known by the acronym CURR, provided that the available documentation is sufficient to permit a meaningful search.

### **The Veteran's Statement – What It Must Contain**

In order for a meaningful search to be initiated, the veteran's statements or description of the stressful incident **MUST** be full and complete. Again, remember the existence of the VA Form 21-0781, which will aid in this process. The statement **MUST** contain full names, dates (at least month and year), units of assignment (to at least the company or battalion level), and places (city, province, country, etc.). This is where you can be of the greatest assistance to the veteran – insuring that all the evidence is included in this statement. General statements, such as “my best buddy whose name I don't remember died in my arms”, “I almost shot a child”, “my truck almost hit a mine” are all examples of stressors **IMPOSSIBLE** to confirm for lack of evidence or specificity, and will doom the claim to failure on that basis.

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### **What CURR Is, What It Does, and What It DOESN'T Do**

Refer to Pages 40-49 of this handout. You must understand that CURR's role is research, and we emphasize that they do NOT verify the stressor, but rather identify that the incident did or did not occur.

Remember that CURR does NOT research any event or incident alleged to have occurred in Marine Corps service. The USMC has its own research function, which VA can access electronically. You as service officers are involved in the veteran's claim; if you note that VA has directed a request to CURR to research an event for a USMC veteran, you should bring that error to the attention of Adjudication personnel to avoid unnecessarily delaying the processing of the claim.

Remember that CURR can only research incidents that are alleged to have occurred IN SERVICE. Any event alleged to have occurred while the veteran was not on active duty (such as authorized leave or liberty) is NOT within their purview.

The position of CURR Coordinator was established some years ago in an attempt to reduce the number of unnecessary and/or incomplete requests being sent to CURR. Refer to Page 44 of this handout for more information. The CURR Coordinator has the authority to prevent such a request from being sent if, in his/her judgment the request is unnecessary or so materially lacking in verifiable information as to render the request meaningless. You should be aware of the position and authority of the CURR Coordinator, and should not challenge their decision without good cause.

### **Role of the Service Officer**

The most vital role that you play in claims for S/C for PTSD is by assisting the claimant in providing as full and complete a description of the in-service event or stressor. By far the most common cause for delays in the processing of claims for PTSD result from the VA having to send letter after letter to the claimant to solicit the necessary specifics that would permit submission of the description to CURR for verification.

To the extent possible, another valuable service that you can provide in the area of PTSD claims would be to actively discourage veterans from filing claims of dubious merit or claims in which the stressor would clearly be impossible to confirm. VA recognizes that the SO cannot, in most instances, decline to assist the veteran. However, claims which on their surface are clearly doomed to failure for lack of merit or verifiability serve only to further clog a system already overburdened with claims of greater merit or chance of success.